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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a model for assessing transition skills of special needs students in an employment situation. The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensured that students with special needs would participate in the development of a transition plan by the age of 14. The requirement to include transition goals for these students has presented a new challenge for educators: how to assess skills in transition environments. Traditional methods of assessment have addressed prevocational skills, but little progress has occurred in evaluating a student's developing skills once that student is engaged in employment. The advantages that curriculum-based assessments demonstrate in the classroom may carry over into transition environments as well. The Site-Based Evaluation Plan (STEP) is a potential model for evaluating a student's skill in the transition to employment, which involves all stakeholders equally in the transition process. In this model, evaluation becomes a curriculum-based assessment tool, with the job skills becoming the student's transition curriculum. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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Assessing Transition Skills in Employment Settings:

A Potential Model

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Abstract

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensured that students with special needs would participate in the development of a transition plan by the age of fourteen. The requirement to include transition goals for these students has presented a new challenge for educators — how to assess skills in transition environments.

Traditional methods of assessment have addressed prevocational skills, but little progress has occurred in evaluating a student's developing skills once that student is engaged in employment. The advantages that curriculum-based assessments demonstrate in the classroom may carry over into transition environments as well.

The Site-Based Evaluation Plan (STEP) is a potential model for evaluating a student's skill in the transition area of employment, as well as involving all stakeholders equally in the transition process.

Assessing Transition Skills in Employment Settings

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensured that students with special needs would participate in the development of a transition plan by the age of fourteen. The requirement of IDEA to include transition goals and objectives in the individualized education programs (IEPs) for millions of students as they turn fourteen years of age has presented a new challenge for educators. Considerable debate has occurred regarding the best methods for assessing transition skills.

Leconte et al. (1994-95) indicated that the purposes of transition include: (a) the identification of personal levels of career development, (b) the attempt to match interests and abilities with appropriate training or employment, (c) identification of work-related behaviors, skills, and aptitudes, and (d) the determination of effective academic, vocational, and life-skill supports (p. 41). Unfortunately, none of these stated purposes of transition address evaluating a student's developing skills once that student is actively engaged in competitive employment. In order to provide an effective transition program, educators must be able to accurately assess the skills required in employment environments.

Traditional Assessment Practices in Special Education

Traditional assessment practices in special education include a variety of approaches — standardized and nonstandardized, formal and informal measures. The advantages of standardized instruments, such as academic achievement tests, intellectual functioning assessments, adaptive behavior scales, and vocational skills assessments have been documented. According to Levinson (1994), these tests provide objective measures of certain skills and possess satisfactory reliability and validity. Further, standardized, norm-referenced tests present a way of comparing the

performance of one student with another, and of judging a student's progress over time. Because of the comparative nature of standardized assessments, these tests are useful for determining the type of programs into which students may enter.

Standardized tests have been criticized for a number of reasons. Mehrens and Clarizio (1993) suggested that one problem is a mismatch between the test and the curriculum that a student has been taught. These researchers also cited the considerable cost in terms of actual expense, time, and the specialized personnel required to administer, score, and interpret test results. Most importantly, standardized instruments lack an emphasis on data that are useful for designing, implementing, and evaluating instructional interventions (Reschly et al., 1988).

Nonstandardized, less formal methods may be more effective in gaining information that assists in program planning. Clark (1996) indicated that some of the most frequently used informal assessments include surveys, interviews, checklists related to goals, interests, and preferences, and observational reports from teachers and parents.

This type of informal evaluation has several advantages. Sattler (1988) indicated that interviews provide a way to gather information about students that may not be obtained in any other way. Observations may also provide a way to measure nonacademic behaviors, and provide information that support conclusions made about students from other assessment techniques.

Alternately, a number of disadvantages have been associated with the use of nonstandardized measures. Reliability and validity of surveys, interviews, checklists, and observations are difficult to establish. In the case of interviews and observations, biases may interfere with the results and conclusions.

Standardized measures such as the Transition Behavior Scale (McCarney, 1989) and the Life Centered Career Education Knowledge Battery (Brolin, 1989), as well as information gained from interviews with students, parents, and employers, behavioral or functional skill inventories, and rating scales of employability, independent living, and personal-social skills may help determine a student's readiness for transition to employment and independent living. A significant shortcoming of these conventional types of assessments, however, is that they are of little use once a student has exited the classroom and moved into an employment environment.

With an increasing emphasis on transition planning in special education, interest in the area of transition assessment is gaining attention (Leconte et al., 1994-95). Traditional methods of assessment emphasize prevocational skills or employment readiness. Educators have made progress in evaluating pre-transition skills in the classroom. Now, a critical need exists for ways to assess the skills a student demonstrates in the workplace.

Toward an Employment-Centered Approach

The purpose of evaluation is to acquire accurate information for the purpose of making educational decisions. In the case of transition, the decisions that are being considered may impact a student's life for years to come. Therefore, precise, useful data should be obtained in order to develop a meaningful transition plan for students. One effective way to evaluate transition skills is through the use of curriculum-based assessment (CBA).

Curriculum-based assessments are procedures in which assessment is directly based on the curriculum that is taught to students. CBA uses direct, frequent measurement to determine student progress toward educational goals. CBA is a test-teach-test process that informs the teacher of (a) where the student is in the curriculum, (b) which specific skills the student has

or has not learned, and (c) what to teach next (Beirne-Smith, personal communication, February 12, 1997).

The advantages associated with the use of curriculum-based assessment in evaluating skills in the classroom are well documented. Deno (1985) indicated that because CBA consists of frequent, repeated measures of performance, this type of evaluation is sensitive to student growth over short durations of time. Further, the results may be graphically displayed, making documentation of student growth easily visible.

If regular measurements of student performance are to occur, the assessment procedures must be cost-effective. Curriculum-based assessments are cost-effective, because they do not require the purchase of additional testing materials, nor do they require specialized personnel to administer, score, and interpret the results. In addition, the time required to administer CBAs is only a fraction of the time needed to administer commercially prepared norm-referenced tests (Deno, 1985).

Fuchs and Fuchs (1996) identified some disadvantages of curriculum-based assessment. CBA procedures do not specify any particular sequence with which to introduce skills, nor is the assessment task embedded in real-life situations, which requires a significant degree of generalization by the student. Beirne-Smith (personal communication, February 12, 1997) indicated that curriculum-based assessment measures (a) are time-consuming to construct, (b) require extensive teacher knowledge of the curriculum, and (c) can result in teaching isolated skills.

Curriculum-based assessment procedures may be an effective way to evaluate transition skills. Many evaluation instruments measure prevocational skills in the classroom. Little

emphasis has been placed on the evaluation of skills that a student develops during the transition phase into employment. A student's success at the job site is significant to everyone involved — the student, the student's family, and the employer. Following is a potential model for using a curriculum-based approach for assessing job skills in the employment environment.

STEP Into the Future: A Potential Model for Assessing Transition Skills in Employment Settings

Picture a traditional IEP conference. The special education teacher, the student, the student's parents, and a special education coordinator are present. The academic goals and objectives have been developed and agreed upon. When addressing the transition section, the student expresses the desire to begin her work experience during the school year. The IEP team decides that she will attend school for half of the school day, with the remainder of the time being spent working at a local department store. The special education teacher will be responsible for setting up the student's schedule, coordinating the student's work experience (including meeting with the employer to discuss abilities, needs, and expectations), and augmenting the student's work skill development during her academic classes.

Imagine a different kind of IEP conference. The same participants are in attendance, as well as a transition coordinator and the manager of a local department store. The student at this conference has also demonstrated his desire to begin his work experience during the school year. He will also attend academic classes for a half day, then spend the remainder of the school day working at the local department store. In this conference, the IEP team decides that the academic goals and objectives will be the responsibility of the special education teacher, the instruction and continued assessment of work skills will be the responsibility of the store manger, and the

communication between the school and the department store will be the responsibility of the transition coordinator.

The picture of the second IEP conference, which may be uncommon in many schools, could become standard practice. The Site-Based Transition Evaluation Plan (STEP) may provide a sharing of responsibilities during the transition process from which everyone may benefit.

What is the problem?

Many current transition programs consist of a teacher arranging a job placement for a student, then "running interference" to ensure that everything is working satisfactorily. In these situations, much of the assessment, planning, and implementation of transition programs falls mainly to the special education teacher. In addition to instructional duties, the teacher must find a way to coordinate these transition activities, as well as support the learning that goes with employment. In the STEP program, the roles are changed, and the responsibilities are shared among the stakeholders in the transition program.

STEP: A possible solution

The primary stakeholder in the transition process is the student, but a successful transition program benefits other stakeholders as well. One stakeholder who is often overlooked is the employer. The employer stands to benefit from a well-prepared employee who exhibits solid work skills, so he should take part in developing the transition plan for the student (Table 1). After all, who better than the employer would know what skills the student needs to master in order to be successful on the job? Who would have more knowledge about teaching specific job skills in sequence, in the environment in which the skills will be used?

STEP PROGRAM ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

STAKEHOLDER	BEFORE THE IEP CONFERENCE	DURING THE IEP CONFERENCE	AFTER THE IEP CONFERENCE
STUDENT	explore career possibilities, make decision about job placement	self-advocacy by participating in decision-making	participate appropriately in school and work environments
PARENTS	assist student in exploring career possibilities	advocate for the student; participate in developing goals and objectives	monitor student's progress, discuss concerns with teacher
SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER	complete academic, behavioral, and prevocational assessments	help to develop academic and behavioral goals and objectives	instruction of academic and behavioral skills; liaison between school and home
TRANSITION COORDINATOR	develop list of job placement related to student's interests	coordinate the school-to-work transition between the employer, student, and teacher	liaison between school and work
EMPLOYER	conduct pre-employment evaluation at the job site	designate the skills to be included in transition section of IEP based on employee evaluation	assess student's skills periodically using employee evaluation

Evaluation in the STEP Program

As in traditional practice, the special education teacher will conduct academic and prevocational evaluations to determine strengths, interests, and needs, and will provide the resulting data to the IEP committee. In the Site-Based Transition Evaluation Plan, all other assessment data will be provided by the employer.

A common business practice is for all employees in a workplace to be evaluated using a company-developed employee evaluation. In the STEP program, this evaluation becomes a curriculum-based assessment tool, with the specific job skills becoming the student's transition curriculum. Before the IEP conference, the student will be evaluated by the employer on the job site, using the employee evaluation. The employer will provide the results of the evaluation to the IEP committee. This information will be used to develop transition goals and objectives during the conference.

The employer's responsibilities do not end here. Once a student is employed, the employer (or another employee) will provide instruction on the job skills "curriculum" based on the pre-employment observation — job training. The employer will report progress to the transition coordinator. If further support is needed in skill instruction, the transition coordinator and special education teacher will provide that support at school.

The employer will also be responsible for follow-up evaluation to document the student's progress. As the employee evaluation was used as a pre-test, the same evaluation may be used as a post-test after skill instruction.

Advantages of the STEP Program

One advantage of a program of this type is that it allows for an equitable distribution of responsibility in developing student into productive citizens. It provides a partnership among all the stakeholders, with each stakeholder filling the role most compatible with his own skills. The employer has the advantage of doing the initial assessment of the student-employee, so he can see firsthand what the student's needs and abilities are, and he will be able to best determine what skills to teach the student first.

The advantages of curriculum-based assessment apply to the STEP program. By utilizing a standard company-developed employee evaluation, frequent repeated measures may be done easily, allowing for documentation of student growth. Also, no additional time or materials are required in order to gather information on student performance, so this type of evaluation procedure is cost-effective.

Some disadvantages of curriculum-based assessment, however, may not necessarily apply to the STEP program. In the STEP program, the assessment consists of a real-life assessment tool, which is administered in a real-life situation, so no generalization is required. The contention that CBA measures are time-consuming to construct may be valid in the classroom, but in this type of evaluation system, the CBA measure is the regular company-developed evaluation tool, so no additional time would be required to generate an assessment instrument.

The Challenge

The advantages of using this type of evaluation method in assessing transition skills on-site may be numerous. The challenge for students, parents, and educators will lie in convincing employers to "buy into" the benefits of the program. Unless employers believe

this type of "hands-on" evaluation and instruction program will benefit his company, the employer will be unlikely to invest the time necessary to conduct the pre-employment evaluation and attend the IEP conference.

Future research in this area may include surveying a sample of employers to determine if a large number would be willing to participate, and to see if certain types of businesses naturally lend themselves to this type of program.

The student is certainly the primary stakeholder in the transition process. However, in an effective transition program, other stakeholders benefit as well. In the STEP program, the considerable responsibility of conducting all of the assessment and all of the instruction is distributed evenly among the stakeholders, so that everyone benefits.

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